DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 326 324 PS 019 364

AUTHOR Fung, Margaret
TITLE Working with Working Families. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education, Urbana, Ill.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO EDO-PS-90-8
PUB DATE 90
CONTRACT RI88062012
NOTE 3p.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses - ERIC Information Analysis Products (071)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Day Care; Early Childhood Education; *Employed Parents; *Parent Participation; *Teacher Role
IDENTIFIERS ERIC Digests

ABSTRACT

This ERIC Digest offers tips for understanding the needs, concerns, and feelings of employed parents, and discusses ways child caregivers can involve working parents in their children's lives while the children are enrolled in child care facilities. Competition with the caregiver, guilt over leaving children in the care of others, and little time for activities are characteristics of employed parents that may affect their relationship with caregivers. That relationship can be facilitated by flexible scheduling, parent visits, parent education, formal and informal communication, and informal gatherings. (BB)

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ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education
University of Illinois
805 West Pennsylvania Avenue
Urbana, Illinois 61801
(217) 333-1386

ERIC Digest

EDO-PS-90-8

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Working with Working Families

Margaret King

Well over half the women with children younger than 6 are in the labor force. This percentage has greatly affected the number of children who are cared for outside the home by someone other than a parent and the way in which caregivers and parents must interact. Research on parent involvement suggests that parents should take active roles in their children's lives while the children are enrolled in child care facilities and that parent involvement enhances children's development.

In the past, it was easier for parents (usually mothers) to volunteer for activities in preschools or attend meetings. But with many more women in the work force and heading single-parent families, it is becoming difficult for many parents to participate actively in child care programs. As a result, some parents may see parent involvement in child care programs as an additional pressure. To build positive relationships with parents, caregivers need to gain a better understanding of the needs, concerns, and feelings of employed parents.

Understanding Parents

Employed parents have different needs than parents who are not working. Several factors—including competition, guilt, and time—may affect the relationship between an employed parent and a caregiver. The parents may feel they are competing with the caregiver for the child's affection, since both parent and caregiver have formed protective attachments to the child. For example, the mother of one 10-month-old was concerned that the child might take her first steps in the presence of the child care worker instead of the mother. Likewise, a father became concerned at the end of the day when he asked his child to get ready to go home, and the child protested by saying, "I don't want to go home." In reality, the child was just showing frustration at being separated from dad all day. Situations like these can strain the relationships between parents and child care workers.

Guilt is another feeling that employed parents experience. They may feel that they are abandoning their children by leaving them while they work. Children often contribute to their parents' guilty feelings by expressing their dislike of the parents' leaving. Children sometimes show anger by crying and yelling at their parents when it is time to separate. Children may say, "I don't want you to go to work," "Why do you have to go to work?" or "I don't like my school." It is often hard for parents to explain to their preschool children why they are working and why they must leave them. On the other hand, parents sometimes feel even more guilty when their children do not protest.

Time is also a critical factor. Employed parents may feel that they have many roles and duties to perform but not enough time to perform them. Consequently, they often feel overwhelmed. Employed parents place their children in child care facilities because they are not available to care for the children themselves. Parents who work 40 or more hours a week may feel that they do not have time to volunteer in the center or come in to observe for an hour. The lack of time may intensify the parents' feelings of guilt and competition.

Involving Employed Parents

The child care center and family day home must use a variety of methods to encourage parents to participate. Employed parents need many options to choose from if they are to become active participants in the child care setting.

Remember, not all parents will take advantage of every opportunity. However, child care programs must continue to support families and the ties between parents and children by allowing the parents to make decisions about how much involvement and which experiences and activities meet their needs. A child care service can support the relationship between parent and child through flexible scheduling, parent visits, parent education, formal and informal communication, and informal gatherings.

Flexible scheduling. Many child care centers and preschools have a specific time when all children must be present. Parents need the flexibility to bring children when they choose. Field trips and lunch are exceptions to this principle. However, if a parent can inform the staff of the child's arrival time, plans can be adjusted accordingly.

Flexibility may allow a parent to spend a morning with the child if the parent doesn't have to be at work until noon on a certain day. For example, Jessica's dad doesn't have to be at work until 10:30 a.m. on Wednesdays because he works late on Tuesdays. So Jessica and her dad do

something special, such as jogging in the park. Flexibility also makes it easier if parents are divorced and the child stays overnight with the noncustodial parent. Sometimes an extra hour in the morning gives the parent an opportunity to spend additional time with the child. The extra time with a parent may be more important than the fingerpaint activity planned by the caregiver.

This type of flexibility does not mean that parents can have a drop-in arrangement every day. Routines are important to a child's sense of security and well-being. It also does not mean that parents are given reduced rates. Instead, parents and caregivers can work together to decide how to give parents the flexibility they may need.

Parent visits. Parents should have open access to a facility, and visit whenever they wish. One option is to invite parents as special guests who demonstrate their talents. Parents can also be encouraged to visit as a way of spending time with their children. Parents can come by at noon and take their children out to lunch. In infant and toddler programs, parents often come to the child care facility to feed their babies during the lunch hour. For older preschoolers, lunch can be a special treat, as long as they understand that they won't leave when their parents leave. Sometimes parents may have other hours in the day that they would like to spend with their children. A father who finishes a business errand sooner than expected may want to sit in the room and read a story to his child or help the child complete a puzzle.

Parent education. Child care centers and family day homes can offer parents information on topics such as family time management, child development, nutrition, safety, and parent-child communication. Employed parents may not want to come back to a night meeting after they pick up their children in the evening. Facilities can plan programs for various times. Brown bag lunches may be best for some parents, while after-work potlucks or dinner meetings with child care providers may be better for others. Some may prefer early breakfast meetings. Whatever arrangements are made, child care facilities can continue to make information available through newsletters, parent bulletin boards, and communication at arrival and departure times.

Informal communication. Daily communication between parents and caregivers is essential. Caregivers need to talk with parents as they arrive and depart. Information about a child's time away from the center and behavior in the center can be exchanged. In sharing information, the caregiver and parent can begin to develop an understanding of each other's goals for the child.

One excellent method, especially with infants and toddlers, is for caregivers to send home a daily information sheet so that parents have some information about what the child did during the day. Parents are interested in what their children are like when they are not with them. On a half sheet of paper, write the child's name, eating pattern, toileting behavior, playmates, and comments about activities in which the child has participated. The daily information sheets should not replace personal contact with parents at the end of the day. Caregivers should make sure they have at least one positive statement about each child that they can share with the parent at the end of the day.

Formal communication. Home visits are another important, but rarely used, communication tool. Caregivers should try to visit children's homes at least once a year. A parent is often able to talk more easily when the caregiver is on the parent's turf. Caregivers can learn about the parent's child rearing practices.

Parent-teacher conferences are still a must in centers and homes. These conferences provide an opportunity for parents and caregivers to interact. Since a conference provides a sharing of information, the caregiver must be prepared to receive and to give information.

Informal gatherings. Planning opportunities for parents, staff, and children to interact informally is also important. Examples include a Saturday carnival in the spring or fall, an afternoon at the pool, a potluck supper, or an afternoon at the skating rink. As parents become acquainted, they can turn to each other for support.

Understanding and responding to the needs of working parents is necessary to maintaining healthy communication between parents and caregivers. A positive relationship between parents and the child care staff will bring rich rewards in the child's development.

The article was adapted from "Working with Working Families," *Texas Child Care Quarterly* (Fall 1989): 3-8.

For More Information

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